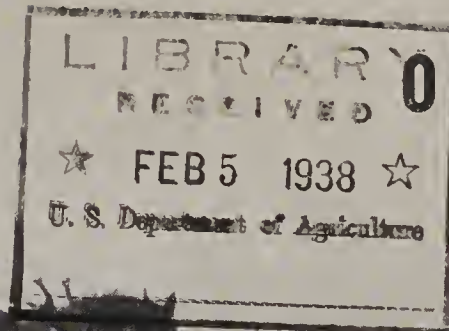


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BETTER LAND USE... A PROGRAM

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IN THE Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act of 1937, Congress authorized the Secretary of Agriculture to develop a program of land conservation and land utilization. Work on this program, including the purchase of land classed as submarginal for crop cultivation, has now been started with an appropriation of \$10,000,000 made for the fiscal year ending June 30, 1938. Administration of the land-use program has been delegated by Secretary Wallace to the Bureau of Agricultural Economics.

BETTER LAND USE IS A STEP TOWARD AGRICULTURAL REHABILITATION

Congress made it clear that the purpose of the land-use program is to "correct maladjustments in land use," and thereby to improve the economic condition of American agriculture.

The results of unwise land use are becoming steadily more evident. When the land is used without sufficient regard for its physical and economic characteristics, farmers and others dependent upon the land are unable to make a living. Families that have settled on farms where the soil is poor, or on land which for some other reason cannot produce crops in competition with better areas, cannot support themselves. They are frequently unable to pay their taxes or to pay the interest on their mortgages. Often they have to depend upon public relief in some form in order to escape complete destitution.

When land is used unwisely, a waste of the natural resources of soil, grass, and forests usually results. Poor farmers on unproductive land have no money to invest in terracing their land and otherwise protecting the soil from erosion. Farmers whose holdings are too small find it difficult to avoid overgrazing their

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pasture, and are frequently forced to work their cropland to death. The farming of lands that are primarily suitable for forests not only keeps families on the land in poverty, but prevents proper forest development and often stands in the way of necessary flood control.

Burdensome costs of local government are another result of unwise land use. Families who cannot make a living from their poor land, and cannot pay taxes on their farms, must be provided with schools and roads at the expense of other taxpayers.

These facts illustrate how poor land use results in costs to the Nation—costs in human poverty, costs in relief, costs in wasted land, and costs in inefficient local government. The purpose of the land-utilization program is to correct the misuse of land in order that these costs may be removed and that rural communities may gain higher standards of economic welfare.

LAND-USE PLANNING POINTS THE WAY

Before the goal of better land use can be achieved, facts about present conditions must be thoroughly understood, just as a doctor must diagnose a sickness before he can prescribe a remedy. During the last 4 years, land-use planners of the Department of Agriculture have diagnosed problems in various parts of the United States. They have found that much of the poverty and waste of land can to a large extent be traced to two important factors:

About half a million families are occupying farms on which they cannot earn a living by crop cultivation, because of poor soil, drought, or other physical and economic factors.

Another large number of families have farms that are too small for the only kind of farming operations for which the land is suited.

In the Great Plains, where poverty and land depletion have been particularly severe during recent years, the Department has mapped areas where farmers have found their land unsuited to crops because of extended drought. Many of these unproductive farms have already been abandoned by their former operators. Other areas in the Great Plains region have also been surveyed where farmers, now poor, could make a living if they had enough land to combine stock ranching with a limited amount of farming. Owing largely to the provisions of the old homestead policy, many farmers settled in this area on 640 acres or less, which proved to be not enough for a combination farm and ranch.

If the recurrent droughts are to be made less harmful to the Nation, land in the Great Plains that is unsuited to crops should be shifted to grazing, and farmers should be enabled to obtain land in large enough quantities so that overgrazing of the range can be stopped.

Similarly in other parts of the United States, agricultural rehabilitation demands that land unsuited to crops be shifted to forestry, grazing, wildlife protection, or recreation in order to make it permanently useful. This change sounds simple, but frequently many different methods must be employed in order to bring about these improvements. While action to improve land use gets under way on areas already surveyed, the planning of programs to be undertaken in other areas will be continued.

LAND PURCHASE—ONE WAY TO HEALTHY LAND USE

One of the most direct and effective methods that the Federal Government can employ to put land to better use is to buy tracts which are submarginal, or not

primarily suited to crop cultivation, and to develop these lands as grazing areas, forests, or wildlife and recreation areas.

Land is being purchased under this program not because certain tracts look as though they would make good forests, parks, or grazing areas, but because purchasing certain lands is the best way of improving land use and agriculture over a large area. For example, in the Great Plains there are many areas where both public and private lands are broken up into tracts which are unsuited to cultivation and yet too small for grazing units. By buying out the private lands, the Government can include them, together with the public lands, in a large grazing area that can be efficiently managed. Nearby stockmen can then run cattle on this grazing area, through the operation of some leasing system, and the grass can be protected from overgrazing and wind-blowing as it could not be before.

In a similar way farms on unproductive land scattered through forest areas can be bought and turned over to forest use. Wasteful land practices will thereby be stopped, and the heavy costs for schools and roads to serve these unproductive farms will be brought to an end.

During the last 3 years the Federal Government has bought about 9,000,000 acres of land under a program similar to that which is now being undertaken. In the new program now being launched, however, land will be purchased with more strict regard for the goal of agricultural rehabilitation. For this reason land purchases are being concentrated in areas where other measures are being combined with public acquisition to bring about a more productive use of land. For example, preference will be given to areas where rural zoning regulations are in effect, or where soil conservation districts have been organized.

Moreover, lands are selected for purchase where public ownership will help achieve as many different aspects of good land use as possible. For example, land will be bought in an area where public purchase will help control floods, restore needed range resources, and eliminate heavy costs for local

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government, in preference to an area where the public acquisition of land would further only one of these objectives.

Before lands are purchased, arrangements will be made for the management of the lands by some public agency, either of the State or Federal Government, that is best qualified for that work. Most of the development of the land will be done by the agency in the care of which the land will be placed. No land purchased under this program will be resold to private persons. It will be kept in public ownership, although grazing lands may be leased to private operators.

SELECTION OF TRACTS FOR PURCHASE

When an area for purchase has been decided upon in the light of the land-use plans mentioned above, individual landowners will be notified of the opportunity to sell their land to the Government at a fair price based upon its appraised value. Whether a purchase project is finally carried out in any such area depends upon whether landowners are willing to sell.

It can be seen that the Department is not in a position to consider buying individual tracts of land which are not located within an area selected in the land-use planning surveys.

All owners of land selected for purchase within a project area will be given equal opportunity to sell. They can deal directly with official representatives of the Department of Agriculture and will gain nothing by the employment of special agents who may claim to be able to influence the Department's plans.

LAND PURCHASE CANNOT SUCCEED ALONE

If we are to succeed in the attempt to use our lands for the greatest public benefit, other means must be adopted in addition to land purchase. The Government cannot buy all the land that is now being wasted or misused.

Many of the other methods of improving land use are the responsibility of State and local governments rather than the Federal Government. For example, zoning regulations to prevent the wasteful use of land can best be enacted by States and counties, as has already been done in some cases. States can also contribute much by carrying out programs for the classification and good use of tax-reverted lands. Many States and counties do not even take title to lands on which taxes have been delinquent for years.

Soil conservation districts established under the laws that have been passed in many States will afford another opportunity for improving land use far beyond the possibilities of land purchase alone. Establishment of cooperative grazing associations under State law is another important method of securing productive use of land, that has already proved its worth.

In the development of these and other local programs the Department of Agriculture stands ready to help with advice and information.

For further information concerning land use problems write to: Bureau of Agricultural Economics, United States Department of Agriculture, Washington, D. C.

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Henry A. Wallace, *Secretary*

BUREAU OF AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS, A. G. Black, *Chief*

L. C. Gray, *Assistant Chief, In Charge of Land Utilization*